DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 604 SP 019 605

AUTHOR Wendt, Janice C.
TITLE Coping Skills: A Goal of Professional Preparation.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Teachers; *Coping; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Mental Health; Preservice Teacher Education; Public School Teachers; *Stress Variables; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Burnout; *Teacher Education Programs; *Teacher Morale; Teaching Conditions; *Vocational Adjustment

ABSTRACT

A sense of crisis in public schools is helping to make teaching a stressful occupation. Prospective teachers should develop the capacity to cope with the institution as it changes to meet societal demands. They should have the ability to analyze problems and choose appropriate coping mechanisms. A positive outlook on teaching, with the support of colleagues, is essential. Developing outside interests can act as a hedge against burnout. The ability to recognize one's own coping strategies, whether they are positive or negative, is also important. Teacher education programs can alleviate teacher stress by adequately preparing beginning teachers for their roles. This includes providing accurate role exploration and definitions, supplying stress situations under laboratory conditions in student teaching, and helping the prospective teacher deal with structured and unstructured situations through simulations. (FG)

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COPING SKILLS: A GOAL OF PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

Janice C. Wendt

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Janice C. Wendt is an assistant professor and coordinator of HPE teacher education in the Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas 77004.

Running Head: Coping Skills

Address: Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, University of Houston, Houston, Texas 77004.
(713) 749-4386

SP 019 605

Coping Skills: A Goal of Professional Preparation

A sense of crisis exists in today's public schools that didn't exist twenty years ago. This is a product of a "set of heightened expectations of what schools can and should do" tempered with the increased demands of efficiency and accountability by the community and parents (Hurn, 1978). This crisis in public schools is unquestionably helping to make teaching a stressful occupation with experienced teachers being driven from the profession. Beginning teachers exhibit culture shock, insecurity about self and teaching, and a feeling of isolation as they enter the field (Ryan, 1974). Coupled with the existing crises already prevalent in the schools, teachers and teacher educators must develop the capacity to cope with the institution as it is and as it adapts or fails to adapt to future change if they are to be successful.

Twenty years ago, Asylums, an analysis of life in "total institutions," was written by Erving Goffman (1961). Its relevance to life in the public schools in the 1980's is amazing. Speaking of the adjustments and relationships inherent in the institution, Goffman discusses the evolution of defense mechanisms for

coping with the problems of stress associated with prisons, mental, and correctional institutions where the presence of high stress is commonplace. Although the school does not clearly meet Goffman's definition of a "total institution" some of the problems when coping with stress bear similarities with the mental institutions he studied. As is seen in Asylums, invariably the adjustments of the individual to the institution are of utmost importance to the success or failure of the teacher. Whether functional or dysfunctional, the teacher is hard pressed to assuage the uneasiness felt in fitting into the institution. Whether coping with a future with a degree of predictability or one burdened with unpredictability and change, the teacher must be knowledgeable about the sources and reactions to stress as a foundation for the possible options that one's adjustments to stress might take.

A framework has been provided by Coleman and Hammen (1974) to analyze the possible responses when looking at task-oriented reactions to problems of stress. Reactions usually fall into one of three categories: attack, withdraw, or compromise. The chart shows the characteristics common to the reactions to stress. It is important to recognize stress and its symptoms as

well as anticipate stressful situations. The basic steps necessary to coping with any problem or stress are: 1) to define and accept the problem as a challenge 2) work out alternative solutions and decide on a course of action 3) take action and avoid decision by indecision, and 4) evaluate the feedback. It is essential for the prospective teachers to be aware of their coping behaviors as well as their students' coping behaviors if they are to respond in today and tomorrow's world. It is important to remember that much of the students' behaviors are also stress based. The task-oriented approach is usually the most practical way to work through stress and usually has the best chance of resolving conflicts, but factors beyond the control of the individual and faulty values may be stumbling blocks to success (Coleman et al. 1974).

All of this sounds so logical and rational, however stress oftens wears camouflage and has a way of sneaking up on the individual. Stress is often irrational and habit oriented. Even knowing the dynamics of problem solving, prospective teachers may not be able to use this or even be aware of stress and differentiate between stress and emotional dependency. No two teachers have

identical stress tolerances or identical reactions to stress.

The following skills and suggestions can help the prospective teacher cope in the public school setting and make the transition a little easier.

Teachers should have the ability to analyze problems. They need to be able to detect problems and admit that they exist. How accurately do they perceive the problems? How much of their perception of the situation is need-directed thinking? Where does optimism, pessimism, and realism fit into the solution? What about healthy paranoia with the feeling that the principal is looking over one's shoulder? Do they understand the difference between healthy (constructive) and unhealthy (destructive) coping mechanisms? Often the success of a career depends on the teacher's choice of coping mechanisms.

Successful coping includes developing and maintaining a positive outlook toward teaching. It is important to maintain positive self-esteem as a basis for personal strength. It can be positive to aid the profession as a contribution and not to further one's own self-gain. The principle of self-commitment should remain near the heart of each individual's teaching philosophy. Be sure to keep personal problems

and professional problems separate. A bad teaching situation can affect one's personal life or vice-versa. Don't be afraid to spend some extra time in planning and organizing on Sunday evening to combat the Monday morning blues. Don't procrastinate.

Develop outside interests as a diversion and a hedge against "burnout." Escapism is not the answer because sometimes one is consumed by outside interests and run from the problems; yet one can become institutionalized if no outside interests exist. Plan for diversion on weekends. Sometimes during stress it is best not to associate with colleagues during leisure time.

It is important to reevaluate the priorities one has toward teaching. Detect role strain or role conflict. Not only is the coach vs. teacher a problem, but so is the teacher vs. counselor or disciplinarian vs. counselor. Maintain professional friends who will be critics and consultants when one is wrong or when behavior is stress-oriented. It is important to have colleagues who will tell you the truth about yourself. Develop a network of professional relationships where a healthy interchange of ideas can occur. If you are a "now"

person, learn to cope with the delays. Remember educational institutions may not be among societies' fastest institutions to experience change.

Prospective teachers must be able to recognize dysfunctional coping mechanisms which are generally nonproductive and defensive in nature. Often the teacher is not aware that the coping device is being used.

The use of displaced aggressions is a potential problem. The teacher may be a constant critic of the administration, faculty, and students. This person embraces the concept of authoritarianism as a classroom disciplinarian and may actually take out the aggressions on the students. This teacher may begin to value "control" more than "teaching," and may emotionally identify with the rules.

Withdrawal can lead to "on the job retirement" or the "paycheck" syndrome where the faculty member is interested only in picking up the monthly paycheck. Being overly rigid in expressing territoriality with "my gym" or "my class" can be unhealthy. A compulsive organizer has the same problem and on a conscious level the individual is unaware it is a coping device.

Indirect compensation in coaching or drill team can give the individual such a sense of self-worth that "teaching" is forgotten and unimportant. One may sell out on professionalism and"baby-sit" by having shallow class activities. Such an individual lives in a fur-lined professional rut that may seem comfortable temporarily. Another unhealthy coping device is to create equity when feeling abused. One may bend the rules and leave school early just to get gratification for pulling it off.

What can the professional preparation program do to help the prospective teacher become aware of one's own stress tolerance?

1. Help the new teacher develop a philosophy toward one's role in physical education. Help prospective teachers to understand why they are in physical education and what they will attempt to accomplish. Help them to accurately define their limits and maintain a clearer degree of self-awareness. Too many prospective teachers don't know why they are teaching or what goals they hope to accomplish. This society often forces career choices on people without experience with selective criteria.

2. Professional preparation programs should

eliminate the element of surprise of being hit on the blind side by stress situations. Bring the stress into the training period where it can be dealt with under laboratory conditions. It is extremely important to honestly discuss feelings and reactions to problems with prospective teachers before they enter the profession. Professional preparation can learn much from the police training procedures for handling stress. Through dramatic recreations, police officers learn how to react under pressure. Nursing educators bring reality in the curriculum for not one student nurse successfully completes the school practicum without having experienced an episode with the bed pan as well as other stressful experiences involved in surgery and hospital care. Law students must pass moot court in order to graduate. These professions create carefully controlled situations where students are deliberately exposed to stressful aspects of their profession, and its purpose is to teach objectivity under stress. Student teaching, as it is presently implemented, is seldom capable of handling stress education in such a hit-or-miss atmosphere. We must at some point add reality training to our life space so teachers can be prepared to cope

with the realities of the public school.

3. Either by the development of video tapes or dramatic scenes re-enacted with drama students, it is important to initiate real situations and impromptu coping. Assertiveness training may be essential. It may not be so much what is said that is effective but how it is said (Doyle, 1980). Help the prospective teacher develop a philosophy toward coping with structured and unstructured situations. Facing and handling a crisis can help the prospective teachers chrystallize their values toward teaching.

Finally, if the crisis in the teaching environment is found to be a part of physical education, our profession must make a commitment to solve the problems so that teaching is all that it can and should be.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TASK-ORIENTED REACTIONS TO STRESS*

ATTACK REACTIONS

Focusing coping resources

Maintaining flexibility

Developing new resources

Affiliating for group action

WITHDRAWAL REACTIONS

Admitting defeat

Leaving the field

Establishing a new direction

COMPROMISE REACTIONS

Accepting substitute goals

Accepting substitute means

Assuring minimum essentials

Taking time to deliberate

* Coleman and Hammen (1974) p. 136-137.

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